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ABSTRACT

A study determined whether or not current forensic judges provide critiques that meet F.P. Trimble's guidelines for improving interpretation ballots. From a randomly selected sample of 150 ballots, 79 ballots were critiques of interpretation events. Each ballot was analyzed as a unit. Results indicated that (1) few forensic judges divulge their philosophy of interpretation on the ballot; (2) only 24% of the ballots were "flowing" the presentation; (3) only 32% of the ballots commented on the issue of lack of emotional or intellectual depth an interpreter brings to a character; and (4) 27% of ballots addressed primary issues of interpretation. Findings suggest that, for the most part, judges wrote ballots that meet many of Trimble's guidelines. (Contains 10 references and a table of data.) (RS)

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We know what to write on ballots--
but do we do it?

by

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A paper presented at the 1994 annual meeting of the

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Participants in forensics generally agree that education is the foremost concern of the forensics community. This education occurs at many levels. Students learn to research, narrow topics, assess quality of evidence, improve their writing styles, etc., through the activity of preparing presentations. Additionally, the student learns presentational and interpersonal skills through interactions with the coaching staff. Finally, students may be educated through the ballots they receive from judges in regional and national competitions.

Researchers have argued that ballot analysis may offer competitors unique educational opportunities (Bartanen, 1990; Jensen, 1990; Mills, 1991; Renz, 1991). However, we have all experienced students receiving the ballot exclaiming "Fabulous! Rank--4" (Caeser, 1994). Obviously, such ballots fail to offer our students an adequate understanding of their performance upon which to base improvement.

In an attempt to end such problems, Frank Trimble (1994) extends Mills (1991) analysis of interpretation ballots. He offers nine actions we should follow to

provide more constructive ballots for interpretation students.

In an attempt to see if what SHOULD occur on ballots actually DOES, I will first review Trimble's (1994) guidelines. Second, I will analyze current interpretation ballots from several Midwestern tournaments. Finally, I will discuss the constructiveness of our ballots and examine possible implications for forensic ballots as educational tools.

Trimble (1994) argued we should follow nine guidelines when writing interpretation ballots. The first guideline is to **write a ballot**--we need to move beyond the "nice job, tough round, 5-20" ballots. Hansen (1988) argued that a good judge writes a ballot that provides concrete, helpful, truthful comments from which a student can learn. From the student perspective, Caesar (1994) claims that ballots "should be legible, thoughts clear, and justification of rank displayed" (p. 40).

Secondly, **divulge your philosophy of interpretation**. Trimble claims that we do a good job of remarking on the physical and vocal makeup of characters. He argues, however, that generally it is

not clear whether the critic disagrees with the interpretation of the character or the execution of an interpretation on the part of the performer. Essentially, it is the responsibility of the judge to articulate his or her stance on issues such as movement, post-structural cutting, appropriateness of topic, etc. From this perspective, the ballot becomes most constructive when the critic's philosophy is unveiled. This type of ballot allows coaches to educate students about opposing interpretation paradigms.

Next, Trimble argues that we should suspend evaluations of "literary merit" or "past experience." He claims that while these comments are rare, they may impede the education of the young interper. We should "set aside our literary likes and dislikes for a time and attempt to evaluate the presentation of the text versus its independent value" (p. 13). Additionally, judges should refrain from evaluating a performance against one seen of the same selection. He claims that a cutting becomes, in essence, a ten minute "play within itself, complete with all (or most) phases of dramatic movement from exposition to denouement" (p.

13). Therefore, we should consider the uniqueness of the performance instead of how it is like others we have seen.

Fourth, he claims, **we should "flow" the performance**. By this he means we should respond to the performance chronologically. Renz (1991) identified this need when describing problems associated in public address ballots. She claimed an outline of the speech accompanying the critique would clarify the suggestions. The judges in interpretation events may do something similar, by describing the scene that occurs with the comments or suggestions. For example, the judge can write the specific passage, line or scene, and then address the problem.

The fifth guideline is to **offer comments concerning the technical aspects of the presentation**. He argues that critics should provide comments such as, "slow down, don't rush through this" or "edit some material to allow for a slower development of the tension." While these seem like basic comments, they can help remind students of important fundamentals such as rate and pitch.

Next, Trimble argues we should offer comments concerning the competitor's emotional/intellectual portrayal of characters. **He advocates suggesting specific emotional qualities** to speaking sections of the text. For example, "you may want to sound more serious on `Is my life worth anything now?'" This approach benefits students, by allowing them to specifically connect moments where their emotionality appears to be weak.

The seventh guideline calls for us to **avoid (or at least define) jargon.** Jargon may accurately describe the reactions of critics, but students may not be familiar with the terminology even if they understand the concepts. Remaining focused on the audience of the ballots is important. If students can not understand the ballot, they cannot be educated by it.

We also want to **avoid ignoring the primary issues.** Here Trimble means that as critics, we often neglect the issues we discuss with students in coaching sessions. For example, we stress the importance of the presence and presentation of the narrator in prose interpretation, but then concentrate on the student's portrayal of characters when we judge the event. If we

opt to focus on primary issues as judges, competitors are likely to follow through with more concrete presentations.

Finally, we want to include constructive criticism. We not only want to provide suggestions for improvement, we also need to let competitors know what strengths they possess. Additionally, we want to provide additional support for those in the early stages of their careers.

The purpose of this study is to determine whether or not current forensic judges provide critiques that meet Trimble's guidelines for improving interpretation ballots. This is important to do, as good ballots increase the educational value of forensics. To accomplish this task, a content analysis of interpretation ballots was conducted.

Methods

The previous guidelines were used as the category scheme for this study. If these are the things we should be doing when we write interpretation ballots--are we doing them? To answer this question, I looked at interpretation event ballots from several tournaments that took place in the Fall of 1994. The

tournaments were held in the Midwest (Districts 3 & 4) and Western (District 9) regions of the American Forensic Association.

Two hundred eleven ballots were at the researchers disposal. Of these ballots, 150 were randomly selected for this study. Seventy-nine of these ballots were critiques of interpretation events. Every interpretation event was represented in this analysis. These ballots were all written for students from the same university, which should not be considered a limitation. As Mills (1991) argues, "it is assumed judges do not dramatically alter comments for students from a particular school" (p. 32).

Considering Trimble's (1994) guidelines, the researcher analyzed each interpretation ballot as a unit. In comparison to other content analyses of ballots (Carey & Rodier, 1987; Mills, 1991), this study does not consider comments as separate units. Trimble looked at the whole ballot in an attempt to note the manner in which comments were rendered. When considering Trimble's guidelines, it is difficult to analyze specific comments outside the context of the whole ballot. For this study, each ballot was analyzed

separately, deciding whether or not it met each guideline.

Results

The findings of this study are summarized in Table One. The results indicate that several of Trimble's guidelines are met by judges writing these ballots. However, several guidelines are also being ignored by most of our judges.

Insert table 1 here

Guideline one, write a ballot, is occurring in 92% of the cases (73 out of 79 times). Divulge interpretation philosophy, the second guideline, only occurred 13 times, or in 16% of the ballots. The third guideline, suspend evaluations of literary merit or past experience, was followed in 75 of the ballots, or 95% of the time. Fourth, "flow" the performance, occurred 24% of the time, or on 19 of the ballots. Fifth, offer technical comments, was found on 78% of the ballots (62 ballots). The sixth suggestion, offer comments concerning emotional/intellectual portrayal of characters, was addressed on 25 ballots, or on 32% of

them. Avoid or define jargon, the seventh guideline, was followed on 70 ballots, or on 89%. The eighth guideline, don't ignore primary issues, was recognized on 27% of the ballots, or 21 times. Finally, the ninth guideline, include constructive criticism, was found on 59 ballots, or on 75%.

Discussion/Implications

This study indicates that for the most part, judges write ballots that meet many of Trimble's guidelines. However, no single ballot meets all of them. Perhaps all judges could benefit by reflecting on the educational benefits of a good ballot.

This analysis indicates that few forensic judges (16%) divulge their philosophy of interpretation on the ballot. This is interesting because one of the concerns often addressed at forensic conferences and at tournament sites is the "sad state of interpretation." Many forensic educators lament that performance, without regard for literature or interpretation tradition, has become the dominant factor in a judge's decision (Dickmeyer, 1993). If this trend is to turn around, judges need to address these concerns on the ballot and rank accordingly.

Only 24% of these ballots are "flowing" the presentation. The lack of flowing may decrease opportunities for students to follow judges' critiques. Renz (1991) claimed it is almost impossible to tell what section of a presentation is being criticized. For example, one judge wrote, "for the most part, you do a nice job with visualization, however, I think you need to bring it out more in your presentation." It is difficult for the student to work on visualization when the judge does not indicate where this problem occurs.

An additional concern often heard among coaches and judges is the lack of emotional or intellectual depth an interpreter brings to a character. Surprisingly, only 32% of the ballots commented on this issue. If students are judged on their ability to create emotionally and intellectually believable characters, then these issues should be addressed on the ballot.

Finally, 27% of ballots address primary issues of interpretation. Each of the interpretation events are unique in their descriptions. For example, in drama we expect an off stage focus and an emphasis on dialogue, yet in prose, narration and description are enhanced by

dialogue. For the student (or his/her coach) to understand a comment such as, "I do not believe this meets the standards of DI," the judge should address the issues that constitute DI. The only way we can expect students to change their approach to events is through a critique that addresses the need.

Additionally, Mills (1991) noted that the majority of ballots focus on the technical aspects of the performance. Like Mills', the current study found 78% of the ballots contained technical comments. Consequently, it appears the focus of ballot-writers leans toward the technical aspects of performance. I feel a need to reiterate Mills argument, "Technique should be used as support for understanding and relating the material--not as the primary means of conveying a selection" (p. 38). As noted in the Action Council in Oral Interpretation in Forensic Competition (1983) "the content of the message is the important thing, not the techniques used to deliver the content. Technical display is not art" (p. 45). If our ballots are based on technical merit, we can expect the students to focus on this issue.

Conclusion

This study considered the oral interpretation ballot as an educational tool. To describe how we are educating our students, a content analysis of interpretation ballots was conducted using Trimble's (1994) nine guidelines. Finally, possible implications of forensic judges' comments were considered.

Forensic judges have the opportunity to educate students via the ballot. This pedagogic approach may be effective if we are careful with the comments we make. To ensure our students have the greatest educational benefits we can afford them, we should be cognizant of the power of the pen and wield that power carefully.

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Table 1: Summary of interpretation ballots & Trimble's guidelines

Guideline	ballots meeting guideline	ballots not meeting guideline	% meeting guideline
Write a ballot	73	6	92
Divulge philosophy of interpretation	13	66	16
Suspend evaluation of "literary merit" or "past experience	75	4	95
Flow the performance	19	60	24
Comment on technical aspects of presentation	62	17	78
Comment of emotional and intellectual portrayal of characters	25	54	32
Avoid jargon	70	9	89
Don't ignore primary issues	21	58	27
Include constructive criticism	59	20	75